

Michelle Tarbox, M.D.

What causes skin cancer?

0:06

There are actually many things that contribute to the development of skin cancer. But the most important factor and the one we have the most control over is how much UV radiation our skin is exposed to over the course of our lifetime. A lot of skin exposure to the sun happens during childhood and adolescence. And there used to be a very discouraging statistic that would say you'd had 90% of your sun exposure by the time you were 20 years old. So a lot of people who

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and itching around the lesion as well. That doesn't mean that every itchy spot is skin cancer. But if something has an unusual symptom, for sure, bring it to the attention of your physician.

What are some common misconceptions about skin cancer?

2:38

Common misconceptions about skin cancer are that it can't happen to me, that's probably the most common skin cancer. Incorrect assumption anybody can get skin cancer if you have skin, you can get skin cancer on it. Even the parts of our skin that never see the sun can rarely develop skin cancer, which is one of the reasons that both at home exams of your own skin as well as professional exams through your physician are a very good idea to prevent any kind of bad outcomes from skin cancer.

Does someone with darker skin have less risk of skin cancer?

3:09

Our patients who have darker skin we call those photo types in dermatology, and they range from one which is very light complected usually with very light hair and light eye color. Those patients that just can't be in the sun or they burn immediately. All the way to six which are patients who have the most deeply pigmented skin. Our patients that have more deeply pigmented skin do have better protection against skin cancer and solar radiation. But it isn't perfect protection. And it is something that we need to disseminate awareness about. There have been some great efforts on the part of some leaders, of patients that are people of color, discussing their own diagnoses of skin cancer and bringing awareness to the fact that people who are not the lightest Caucasians can still get skin cancer and they need to be checked and treated properly. Patients who are African American have a specific category of risk on the palms and soles called Acral lentiginous melanoma. This is a kind of melanoma that can grow undetected on those parts of the body. Not all of us look at frequently, especially the bottoms of the feet. It actually famously took the life of Bob Marley, who was of course a famous reggae musician and an avid soccer player. Unfortunately, initially, the lesion on the large toe of the right foot was misconstrued as a bruise for some period of time. And then once the melanoma was discovered, it was very advanced and difficult to treat. So this is the kind of thing you want to detect early. If you're getting a skin exam and the feet are not being looked at. You want to make sure that you make those available to the physician to examine because it's best for us to examine the entire body at once.

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allows access to the scalp for the UV radiation. Or we might have lighter colored hair that doesn't really protect that well, or we might have hair that gets a little bit thinner. And that's not giving us greater protection, especially after the COVID pandemic, we've had more patients with stress related hair loss, and those patients can also have an increased risk of skin cancer on the scalp. So protecting the scalp with a good hat, or sunscreen is very important. Some of the spray sunscreens work well on the scalp, you do want to make sure it doesn't cause any irritation. Other places that patients can forget about or not know that can make skin cancer, or unusual places like the back of the eye. And then every fold on the body back of the years that fold behind the ears is a place lots of skin cancers like to tuck themselves in. And sometimes people will get a sore place from wearing their eyeglasses, that's actually a symptom of skin cancer in that location. Similarly, people can even get skin cancer in their nails, and in their groin areas. So those are all important areas to examine and report any changes that you're concerned about to your doctor.

Why are skin cancer screenings and self-checks important and how can someone perform a self-check?

6:03

I like everybody to get familiar with the skin they're in some people are a little afraid of their own bodies, but it is your body, it's the only thing that goes through your entire life with you.

